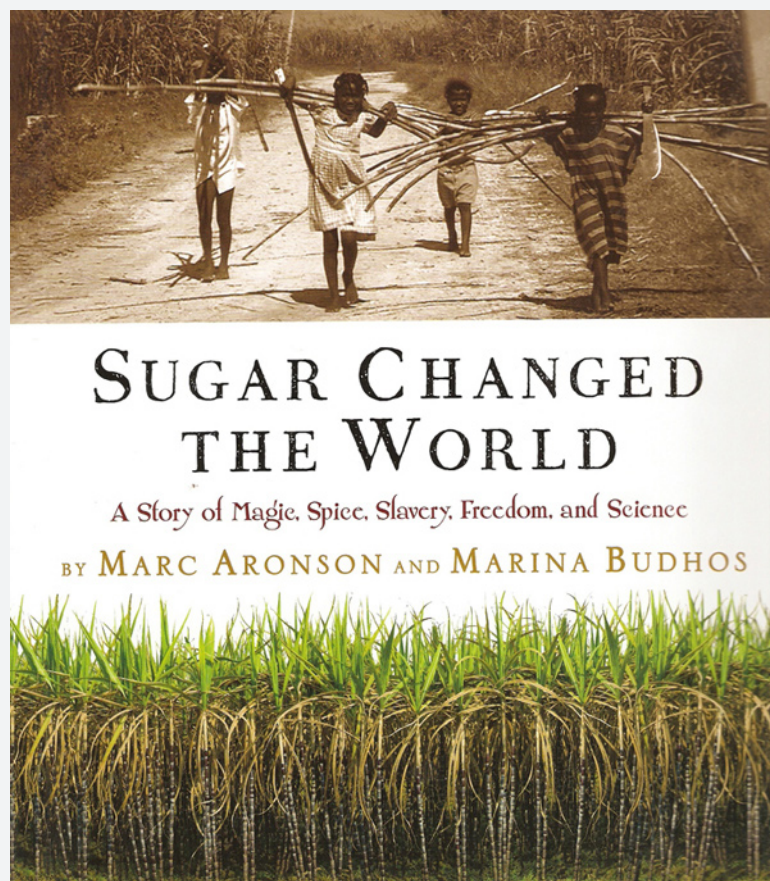


## First Opinion: An Unsweetened History of Sugar Cane

Aronson, Marc and Marina Budhos. *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom, and Science*. New York: Clarion Books, 2010.

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Spanning multiple centuries of world history in some 125 pages of text, *Sugar Changed the World* surveys humanity's seemingly primeval and persistent quest to satiate—and ultimately profit from—its cravings for sweetness. Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos commence their exploration of what became a predominantly brutal and exploitative story of sugar cultivation by briefly addressing sugar's remarkable migration over millennia of history. Appearing initially on the island of New Guinea in the Pacific Ocean at around 8000

to 7000 BCE, sugar cane gradually spread across the globe thereafter. Between 1500 to 900 BCE, sugar attained magical qualities in India, where Hindu priests used it as a central ingredient in religious ceremonies. From the sixth century of the Common Era through the Christian Crusades to retake the Holy Land during the late Middle Ages, sugar became a spice to flavor food. Over that period, sugar cultivation extended, along with its mostly Muslim cultivators, throughout the Mediterranean region. By the 1400s, Spanish and Portuguese explorers expanded sugar's presence to the eastern Atlantic as they introduced cane sugar to the islands off the African coast. By that time, western Europeans were on the cusp of creating, in the authors' appropriate term, an "Age of Sugar."

The bulk of *Sugar Changed the World* thus concerns the several centuries following Christopher Columbus's world-changing 1492 voyage. By essentially opening up a new hemisphere for European settlement, conquest, and development, Columbus's seafaring expeditions also dramatically transformed sugar's ancient and ongoing history. To be sure, Christian and Muslim sugar cultivators had relied on teams of coerced workers to labor on Mediterranean, North African, and East Atlantic sugar plantations—which the book indicates in passing. Yet, in the Americas, Europeans re-applied that model on a massive scale, so much so that the rich, lucrative, sugar-producing Caribbean islands and coastal Brazil constituted "Hell" on Earth for millions of enslaved Africans, as the authors emphasize. To demonstrate that sugar was indeed made with blood, Aronson and Budhos cite several transatlantic slave trade statistics to reveal not simply a virtually incessant European demand for African slaves in the New World. Rather, those figures, in conjunction with a fairly detailed analysis of sugar cultivation's labor intensiveness, further illustrate why on the eve of emancipation in the British West Indies, for example, more than 2 million forcefully relocated enslaved Africans only resulted in some 670 thousand freed African slaves. Curiously, though, little to no discussion was devoted to the workings of the Middle Passage: how Africans were seized for the purposes of supplying human cargo for the transatlantic slave trade; why the manacled march from the African interior to the European "factories" dotting the coast of Africa was so deadly for captive Africans; and how repulsive the conditions were for the tightly-packed human commodities beneath the slaver decks as they traversed the Atlantic Ocean to supply New World sugar producers with much-needed agricultural workers.

From the hellish circumstances that confronted sugar slaves, Aronson and Budhos interweave succinct accounts of subsequent ages of freedom. They explain (not very effectively) how sugar sparked a British North American independence movement after the British mother country adopted the 1764 Sugar Act. The British mainland colonists, however, did not suddenly become American patriots in reaction to a British parliament prepared to enforce collection of a lowered trade duty on foreign molasses in the colonies. The authors more successfully describe the emergence of a British antislavery campaign beginning in the late eighteenth century that skillfully utilized consumer boycotts against

New World sugar to pressure the Parliament to adopt reformatory legislation. Aronson and Budhos nonetheless error when they suggest that an 1807 parliamentary law that banned English involvement in the international slave trade simply led to the United States Congress prohibiting American participation in 1808. The framers of the Constitution essentially incorporated an anti-slave trade clause into the nation's second written framework of government, albeit one that could not actually take effect until after the elapse of twenty years. Lastly, Aronson and Budhos nicely analyze how enslaved Africans on the precious French sugar island of Saint Domingue, in the aftermath of the egalitarian-oriented French Revolution, ultimately secured their own freedom after years of fighting against French armies.

*Sugar Changed the World*, however, does not simply end on an "Age of Freedom" triumphal note. The book's final section recounts the appearance of new sugar workers throughout parts of the Americas who replaced emancipated African slaves. Although the Indian contract workers—or "coolies"—in British Guiana, for instance, were not subjected to a lifetime of involuntary and uncompensated servitude like their African predecessors, they were mistreated and endured an ambiguous in-between status (neither slaves nor free persons) for a term of years. And although the usage of Indian indentured servants marked a new phase in New World sugar production, their labor did not halt the Age of Sugar's apparently steady decline. Enter an ostensibly heroic "Age of Science" which concludes the book. The invention of beet sugar (portrayed as a precursor of modern day, laboratory-engineered substances) thus delivered a devastating blow to sugar cane. As a sweetener derived from a non-tropical agricultural source that surpassed sugar cultivation by the twentieth century, beet sugar, the authors contend, "showed that in order to create that perfect sweetness you did not need slaves, you did not need plantations, in fact you did not even need cane" (p. 117). Whatever the accuracy of that assessment, one cannot escape a Mary Shelley, Frankenstein-esque lesson lurking nearby.

Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos deserve to be commended for their generally undiluted treatment of a still publicly challenging and historically-relevant topic. That the subject is simply and directly conveyed to middle and high-school readers—the authors' intended audiences—renders their book of even greater value. Educators will likely find *Sugar Changed the World* as a readily accessible and discussion-provoking account. Besides an informative narrative, the generous number of artistic and photographed images will also facilitate readers' understanding, as well as a classroom dialogue, about the nature of sugar cultivation and the complexion(s) of sugar laborers. Prospective users of the text are specifically encouraged to have their students consider: (1) the potential connections between the transatlantic patterns of work and consumption during the Age of Sugar with their international counterparts that characterize the world of Internet and superstore shopping today; and (2) the legacy of race-based systems of perpetual

bondage on contemporary societies throughout the Western Hemisphere (the currently televised, four-part PBS documentary series on “blackness” in present-day Latin America would serve as a wonderful supplement).

### **About the Author**

**Raymond James Krohn** is an instructor of history at Colorado State University. He completed his doctoral work at Purdue University under the direction of Robert E. May. His dissertation, entitled “After the Fire: Abolitionist Memory and the Eclipse of Antislavery from the Civil War to the First World War,” is currently being revised for publication. He has written a number of articles and essays that touch upon the themes of slavery, abolitionism, and race.